Introduction: Community Voices: Creating Sustainable Spaces

Sally Paulin

'...public engagement lies at the heart of all sustainability principles...'
(Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy 2003, Principle 10)

The title of this book reflects my desire to capture some of the very real activities that communities in Western Australia have established 'for themselves'. Community engagement is a cornerstone of sustainable development. It is based on the concept of encouraging an active citizenry, empowered to make choices and become involved in decision-making processes, policy formation and resulting implementation at the local, national and global scale. If the community is not engaged with attempts to effect the changes needed to ensure a sustainable society, then there is little hope of achieving widespread acceptance of the need for such change and its promulgation on the local and global scale is considerably weakened. The refusal of the United States and Australian Governments to sign the Kyoto Agreement is a stark example of the primacy of economic and political considerations over the concerns of the wider community to implement cleaner production and create improved outcomes for their local and global environment.

The premise of this book, therefore, is to provide some theoretical background from a social science viewpoint coupled with a series of practical case studies to illustrate how community engagement and civic participation is taking place in Western Australia within the space created by the concept of sustainability. The book's limited geographical focus does not preclude the lessons from being widely applicable both in Australia and internationally. The case studies range from stories of

activists saving forests from logging, to efforts by Indigenous communities to retain aspects of their culture and claim a voice in matters which concern them. They focus upon the different ways in which people come together in the community to achieve sustainability outcomes, encompassing environmental, social, cultural and economic goals. Some of these groups are purely community supported, but others have forged relationships with corporate groups or governments. Some of the groups have been very successful and have achieved productive longevity, while one was less successful with miscommunication contributing to its ultimate demise. Where groups of people come together to work as a community interest group, they experience many of the issues that also face corporate entities such as leadership and group dynamics, funding needs, marketing and the need for continuing relevance to their memberships; all or some of which may create particular challenges which need to be addressed.

The underlying themes of place, process and participation filter through the various chapters.

- *Place*—encompasses a sense of place influenced by social, cultural and environmental factors present in a particular landscape, community or group of people.
- *Process*—this not only considers the mechanics of how communities come together to develop their interests and activities, but also includes policy development and governance aspects that play a major role in determining what can be done and how it can be achieved. The issue of management is important and includes areas such as volunteers, leadership, financial and community responsibilities.
- *Participation*—as previously stated, sustainable development is underpinned by civic engagement and the underlying need to encourage and build active communities. Most of the case studies in this book have been community generated and provide meaningful illustrations of how the ethos of active citizenship can occur in practice.
- *Empowerment*—the final theme, which occurs as a result of the

> other three, must be empowerment. It is through participating in the various activities, whether government or community initiated, that communities can achieve some form of power. The issue then is how is this power utilised?[1]

Before we can begin to come together as 'community', there needs to be some recognition and understanding of cultural backgrounds and situations. Kretzmann[2] has promoted the concept of working with a community asset-based strategy which 'starts with what is present in the community, the capacities of its residents and workers, the associational and institutional base of the area—not with what is absent, or what is problematic, or with what the community needs'. If the emphasis is placed on needs and negative labels, then the community is prevented from starting from a basis of 'positivity' and appreciation of what is possible and how they can use their own talents and 'assets' to help themselves. While outside funding and support is often vital, it can sometimes be counterproductive as the mark of a successful community is that of pride in their own achievements rather than living up to the labels and requirements that are, sometimes unknowingly, bestowed on them by funding bodies. Krempl[3] has confirmed this through her practice in Western Australia of awakening people to the possibilities that they can create from their own skills and backgrounds. For progress to occur then, the various players have to understand where they are coming from, what makes them who they are and how their skills and knowledge can be put to good use for the wider community benefit.

Michael Booth has outlined how the concept of 'practical wisdom' or *phronesis* provides a way of describing and more easily understanding the theoretical issues raised by this discussion of community engagement. He suggests that the traditional 'scientific' manner of recording and analysing social knowledge has hindered lay people's understandings that their particular experiences are important in the search for sustainable solutions.

There are many varied definitions of both sustainability and community; it is worth taking a moment to consider these.

SUSTAINABILITY

Just what is sustainability or sustainable development and what mechanisms can be put in place to encourage a wider diffusion of the issues it raises? The well used 'Brundtland Commission' definition[4] of sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', while simple, is sufficiently general that various interest groups can and have hijacked it to cover their particular agendas. While embracing the triple bottom line approach of ensuring economic, environmental and social factors along with intergenerational equity are all taken into consideration, there is a large level of cynicism as to the way these factors are weighted by the various proponents when decisions and strategies are formulated. Saunier and Meganck[5] go some way to explaining the inconsistencies of the various definitions and suggest that:

> the abstract and the practical are two levels of conceptual intensity that fall out of the hundred or so definitions of sustainable development. All of us are captivated by, and intuitively understand, the abstract idea of sustainable development. What we grasp of it at the practical level is something else altogether. Being understood differently by each, sustainable development is a term that most politicians, entrepreneurs, and environmentalists alike, enthusiastically embrace; development and conservation together are a heady mix. Add to that the positive feedback every time someone uses the term, no matter the context and content, and we have the stuff of conflict and chaos.

The authors of the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy[6] had the difficult task of trying to bridge such gaps between the abstract and the practical, between what was seen as environmentally desirable and what was economically, socially and politically practical. The strategy was important, not only because of its stated intent to instill the ethos of sustainability into all state and local government activities in Western Australia but also because it was the first attempt

by any government to create such a strategy and have it enacted by the legislature. Saulnier and Meganck suggest that the only way to 'manage emerging change in complex social systems [is to] include the participation of civil society and the creative management of conflict'[7]. This has been a key part of the way in which Western Australia has approached putting sustainability into operation since 2001.

The Gallop Labor Government was elected in 2001 against a background of forest protests employing a well-orchestrated media and public relations campaign that included vocal environmental groups, local celebrities and the so-called 'doctors' wives'.[8] Environmental activism in the forests of South Western Australia had been ongoing for some years. Maddock and Lee describe the ethos of these peaceful activists who successfully argued for a re-evaluation of the nexus between the need to log to provide jobs and the need to preserve the environment. They view humans as sharing the earth and not as plunderers. This theme is shared by Hallen and Frith in their testimony as a local community saving Dalgorup Forest from logging and its subsequent creation into a national park.

The Labor election platform was that of community engagement in decision making, described by some commentators at the time as populous and unlikely to be effective. Their ideas are similar to those of the 'New Progressives' movement in the United States who speak of the need for:

> A third choice that replaces the left's reflexive defense of bureaucratic status quo and counters the right's destructive bid to simply dismantle government. Such a 'new progressive' governing philosophy sees government as society's servant, not its master—as a catalyst for a broader civic enterprise controlled by and responsive to the needs of citizens and the communities where they live and work.[9]

Thus some departments in the State Government, notably the Department of Planning and Infrastructure, and the Office of Citizens and Civics,[10] have actively initiated forums and processes whereby

community members have been encouraged to take part in deliberative democratic and civic governance processes with regard to the future development of the state. Newman and Hartz Karp[11] were major players in this task, made more difficult given the size of the state and its varied character. Indeed Broderick[12] has drawn attention to the need to educate both government agencies and communities about what can be achieved through well-planned engagement. To that end, the Office of Citizen and Civics has instigated dialogue both within and between agencies to ensure that well-planned engagement processes become a vital stage in the decision-making process and that outcomes are not predetermined. At the same time, several peak civic society groups came together to form the WA Collaboration, an independent 'community' forum interested in discussing and promoting sustainability. Hodgson and Buselich describe this process and consider the challenges raised in creating a 'space' where consensus could be reached, and decisions representative of the Collaboration could be presented as an important and valid voice of 'the community'.

COMMUNITY

'Community' also requires a definition.[13] It is another of those words used glibly but without easily defined parameters. Politicians speak of their constituency as 'the community', often assuming that they are knowledgeable about what the community that elected them wants. Then there is 'the local community' which is bounded by a particular space but will also include representatives of other 'communities' of interest, the cricket club community, the school–church community, the birdwatchers and wildflower enthusiasts. While some of these communities may be spatially located in one geographic area, they will also have links with networks of similar interest groups and it is these links that make them powerful actors in forums where their particular interests are being discussed or are at stake. Bourke[14] asks:

> while each person having different meanings can seem useless (we still don't know what community is), can community be anything

> more than the identities and meanings associated with one's own experience? Community, then, is not about types of social organisation but about meanings which give community members a sense of identity. In this way, community reflects a symbolic commonality...which is based on what its members attribute meaning to...

This is a particularly apt description for the Indigenous community, whose sacred symbols unite them as communities and clans. Clements[15] writes about the ways in which the Noongar[16] community, through the South West Land and Sea Council, is seeking to be heard in native title negotiations and other issues affecting their traditional country. She emphasises that it is vital to be inclusive of all cultures and to find ways that Indigenous culture can contribute to building lasting sustainable communities. The issue of Indigenous community aspirations is further illustrated by Stewart, who writes about the Wardandi people and their efforts to maintain culture and country while at the same time becoming part of the wider community.

McGrath and Marinova describe a facilitation process designed to create a space whereby the Martu community in Newman could play an active role in discussions with government agencies with regard to provision of local housing and infrastructure. This case study emphasises the difficulties in countering unbalanced power relations both within the community and in the government department–client relationship.

Mackay[17] has commented on the current feeling of insecurity experienced by Australians resulting from political and technological changes over the past eighty years. He suggests that those born in the 1970s—'the Rising Generation'—feel alienated and susceptible to depression and suicide, while the Baby Boomers are trying to come to terms with the consequences of their consumerist 'Me' generation.

> Some of us have realized that the most effective antidote to insecurity is to re-establish our communal links and to re-connect with each other. Already, the signs are emerging that Australians are searching for ways to reconnect with 'the herd' or 'the tribe'. In everything from adult education classes to book clubs, choirs and

> bush-walking groups—to say nothing of clean-up campaigns—people are looking for new social contexts which will help to restore the sense of identity and security which we draw from belonging to herds.[18]

This book attempts to describe some of these social contexts and ways in which a sense of stewardship and belonging can become the norm. For instance, Stocker and Netherwood write about a Coastcare project with school children exploring their local beach and being introduced to the concept of caring for their environment. Their findings illustrate that young children are fascinated by the discoveries they make, and can make connections between caring for the beach and the development of their own values. Palmer carries through this theme of young people with an examination of youth involvement in local government activities.

Stewardship groups such as Friends' Groups are active in many communities, and O'Byrne gives an overview of how such groups operate. More often than not, these groups form through a passion to preserve a particular piece of land from development or environmental damage. They are semi-autonomous and rely on volunteer community members to survive. They need various skills to carry out their chosen task including knowledge of bush regeneration, organisational skills and, very importantly when fighting for preservation, good media and negotiating skills with a knowledge of planning and council processes. Severn writes about the Friends of Moore River who have successfully utilised many of these skills, and he argues for the community to be given a space at the table when planning decisions are made.

Davison's case study describes the setting up and operation of a community garden centre in Fremantle called Sustainable Settlements Inc. This project was initiated by a businessperson, the local council and the local community but, unfortunately, poor communication and misunderstandings among the players led to its demise. This is an important discussion as 'doing community' is not always a positive experience. It can often be frustrating and harmful to relationships and friendships. This case study also highlights that open communication

and good organisational skills are just as vital in community-initiated activities as they are in government and corporate life.

As noted above, outside funding can sometimes be a deterrent to building empowered communities, particularly if it is encumbered by strict reporting requirements and narrow guidelines. However, there are many instances of communities and governments working together in beneficial funding relationships. Greenskills is one such community organisation that has used government funding to expand environmental education among farmers and landowners in the South-West of Western Australia. One of the initiators of this group, Duxbury describes how they applied Gandhian principles learned as activists to create a well-organised group where regular sharing of ideas is encouraged and innovation can flourish.

This book does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of community participation. Indeed there are many topics that merit further study, such as volunteer motivations and retention, building a sense of community and the subsequent effects of this on social capital. Many other stories could have been included. It does, however, showcase some encouraging initiatives, both community and government driven, which indicate a growing acknowledgement that the only way forward is through sustainable use of resources, both human and environmental.